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UNCLAS VIENNA 002987

SIPDIS

CA/VO/F/P FOR DLOPESDAROSA; CA/EX FOR SHARPER;
EUR/AGS FOR VVIKAMANISKELLER

PARIS, ROME FOR CONSULAR CHIEFS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: VWP BIOMETRIC CERTIFICATION DEMARCHES
DELIVERED

REF: A) STATE 162157 B) 111324 C) 125862 D) VIENNA
2165

1. SUMMARY: IN RECENT DAYS POST HAS RAISED THE POINTS IN REF B AT VARIOUS LEVELS WITHIN THE AUSTRIAN GOVERNMENT. OUR INTERLOCUTORS INFORM US THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR AUSTRIA TO MEET THE OCTOBER 26 DEADLINE. THE AUSTRIAN FOREIGN MINISTER BELIEVES THIS ISSUE WILL BECOME A MAJOR SOURCE OF TENSION BETWEEN THE U.S. AND AUSTRIA DURING AUSTRIA'S PRESIDENCY OF THE EU. POST IS REPORTING ON RESOURCE NEEDS AND STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH THE INCREASED WORKLOAD AS REQUESTED IN REF B BY SEPTEL. END SUMMARY.

2. POST HAS RAISED THE POINTS IN REF B AT VARIOUS LEVELS IN RECENT DAYS. THE AMBASSADOR MET WITH AUSTRIAN FOREIGN MINISTER PLASSNIK ON SEPT. 7 AND UNDERSCORED THE LOOMING ISSUE. THE MINISTER EXPRESSED HER UNHAPPINESS WITH THIS SITUATION AND SAID IT WOULD BECOME A MAJOR STRESS POINT WITH THE U.S. DURING AUSTRIA'S PRESIDENCY OF THE EU IN 2006. SHE IS LIKELY TO RAISE THIS ISSUE WITH THE SECRETARY DURING HER UPCOMING VISIT TO WASHINGTON ON SEPTEMBER 9.

3. POST ALSO RAISED THE MATTER WITH THE MFA'S HEAD OF CONSULAR AND LEGAL AFFAIRS, AND WITH THE MOI'S BIOMETRIC PASSPORT PROGRAM COORDINATOR. ALL OFFICIALS INFORMED US THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR AUSTRIA TO ACCELERATE ISSUANCE OF A DIGITAL PASSPORT. INSTEAD, AUSTRIA INTENDS TO AIM FOR LEVEL II COMPLIANCE AS OF LATE SPRING OR EARLY SUMMER IN 2006 (TARGET: MAY 2006) WHEN IT WILL BEGIN CENTRALIZED ISSUANCE OF FULLY ICAO-COMPLIANT BIOMETRIC PASSPORTS. THE MOI IS AWARE THAT AUSTRIA WILL MISS THE DEADLINE AND IS RECOMMENDING ON ITS PASSPORT WEBSITE THAT AUSTRIAN CITIZENS OBTAIN NEW PASSPORT BEFORE OCT. 26.

4. POST HAS URGED THE GOA TO TAKE FURTHER STEPS TO ENCOURAGE TRAVELERS TO OBTAIN PASSPORTS BEFORE THE DEADLINE. WE HAVE ALSO ASSURED THE GOA THAT WE ARE TAKING STEPS TO COPE WITH THE ANTICIPATED INCREASE IN VISA APPLICATIONS BY TRAVELERS WITH PASSPORTS ISSUED AFTER THE DEADLINE (SEPTEL).

5. THE COUNTRY TEAM, INCLUDING PD AND FCS, WILL CONDUCT OUTREACH TO INFORM THE TRAVEL COMMUNITY OF THE NEW REQUIREMENT. WE NOTE, HOWEVER, THAT STAFFING SHORTAGES IN THE CONSULAR SECTION (REF D) WILL MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR THE CONSULAR STAFF TO ENGAGE FULLY. POST URGES THE DEPARTMENT TO SEND TDY ASSISTANCE REQUESTED (SEPTEL) BEFORE THE ACTUAL DEADLINE TO ASSIST WITH OUTREACH.

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